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ABSTRACT

Problems encountered by American students engaging in overseas foreign language study programs, frequently generalized as "culture shock," prompt the author to propose a plan for preparing students for foreign study. Remarks are directed to the preparatory program and the reentry program. The role of the foreign language department is described in terms of: (1) helping the candidate gain fluency in the foreign language, (2) determining who will participate in the overseas study programs, and (3) developing home-campus orientation with regard to the history and culture of the overseas locale. It is suggested that the "normal" language requirements for participation in study abroad programs be raised. (RL)

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NEW ROLE FOR THE LANGUAGE DEPARTMENT: PREPARING STUDENTS FOR OVERSEAS STUDY

Undergraduate study abroad, becoming today increasingly a part of the college scene, calls also for more deliberate and detailed planning by U.S. educators. Regardless of the fact that many American and European institutions of higher education have developed programs of considerable expertise, there still rests on the shoulders of U.S. educators the task of a) preparing students for their study abroad, and b) following up on their overseas stay with a program aimed at extending the impressions gained into a more generally productive experience. Those directing overseas study projects constantly find that too many students come to them poorly prepared both in the language and in awareness for their particular locale's cultural background. On the other hand, the experience of students returning from abroad has shown that also the home campus is poorly if at all prepared to ease their reentry into a culture, which now often appears to them stranger than ever before. As overseas study begins to figure today prominently among the tasks and hopes of our hard-pressed foreign language departments, it may be time to pay more careful attention to this matter. Not only the students for whom the stay overseas is frequently the most formative experience of their youth, but our whole institutions of learning, above all our language departments, should benefit

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greatly from the exercise. The scarcity of space available here makes it expedient that the present paper adhere strictly to a how-to-do-it format. Hopefully, however, it will serve to stimulate further thinking in a frontier section of U.S. education that can be both extremely great fun and quite constructive.

The Preparatory Program

A. Gaining fluency in the foreign language.

It hardly needs pointing out that the greatest challenge still lies with getting students to speak the language of their new surroundings. Without an ability to converse freely in the new language, students lose valuable time--up to a whole semester, in the opinion of many directors--in crossing the cultural barrier and becoming receptive for the more subtle ingredients of their new environment. The practice of beginning the overseas stay with an intensive language course is generally not as productive as had been expected by those programs that adopted it. Its main impediment is that generally such courses have a substantial number of American students, who clique together speaking English, and who tend to reinforce each other's propensity for developing an exaggerated defense posture against the new environment. If one adds the fact that frequently such overseas courses are not geared to the American way of study--often requiring one or two weeks just to get used to the new routine--and that the surrounding environment more often than not is sufficiently distracting to discourage any amount of intensive learning, it becomes apparent that the effectiveness of formal language courses overseas generally does not match that of formal language courses at home. The question is, what can be done at home

to improve our students' language preparation for a year's or even a semester's work overseas?

Two answers come to mind. The more obvious one is that conversation must be stressed more vigorously on all levels of our language teaching. Perhaps the more realistic answer, however, lies in a raising of the "normal" language requirement for participation in an overseas study program. The requirement as it stands with most schools presently, i.e. four college semesters or their equivalent, is barely enough to master the fundamentals in a new language. It may succeed in bringing a few well-motivated students to the threshold of fluency. But to succeed in getting the rank and file participant up to and preferably over this threshold, more course-work appears to be needed. This writer would suggest a "normal" requirement of at least five college terms or their equivalent. In the case of unusually well motivated or otherwise prepared students, of course, one can always make exceptions. Also the main burden in preparing students for this language requirement should go to the high schools, which increasingly are faced with the need of preparing their students for AFS and similar exchange programs as it is.

Should American colleges, however, or more especially American universities, take the lead in calling for this greatly needed change in requirement, they will have to make sure about one more thing. Overseas study programs, together with their requirements, should receive more extensive publicity in college catalogues. High school as well as beginning college students need to be informed as early as possible of the opportunities and the attendant responsibilities pertaining to study programs abroad.

Other means of improving the language skill of prospective overseas students are the following. A "German Table" can be so arranged (small tables, meeting at least once a week, with two or three native speakers in regular attendance) that students get a chance to practice the language informally and get used to the idea that it is not only possible but appropriate to communicate with one's peers in a foreign tongue. As a regular (perhaps introductory) feature of its meetings, the German Club can sponsor language games, a wealth of which could be either imported or adapted from American games. One can make available to students the option of corresponding with pen-pals of either the same or the opposite sex, but preferably living in the same town as will be host to the study program (The local Amerika Haus, YMCA, school board or an agent could be instrumental in procuring contacts). Not to mention the many different things that can be done in the classroom aside from working strictly with textbooks, one should not forget that prospective overseas students are usually better motivated than others to learn the foreign language. They tend to avail themselves much more readily of audio-visual materials so long as these can be either borrowed or bought. Thus it becomes important not to neglect the following:

Subscription to an appealing magazine, occasionally showing good foreign language films, stocking the bookstore with an interesting variety of books, popular as well as classical music records on which the foreign language features prominently, and finally also records of the spoken words (e.g. poetry, dramatizations, comical revues and documentaries). Should it become apparent that in a

given college framework the "prospectives" will not make use of such extra-curricular means of improving their language, it might be advisable to require a project along these lines and give credit for the actual work done. Short of that, however, it is important to impress upon students that usually there is strong competition for places on the overseas program, that selection needs to be quite critical, and perhaps also that the final criterion looked for is that of motivation as it shows through participation in the above-mentioned activities.

B. Early determination of who participates in overseas study.

The point made about motivation brings up the very crucial question of when the student can begin to count on overseas study. It should be clear that the kind of motivation implied above will not set in until the student is reasonably sure that he will actually go overseas. The earlier this decision can be made the better will be his preparation, as well as his overall study-discipline, as experience has shown at least at Beloit College. In the latter institution an attempt is made to come to a final decision on who participates in an overseas seminar, before the term previous to it even begins. To this writer one term seems to provide the absolute minimum in time needed for a good preparation. More ideal would probably be two terms, and it might be worth suggesting that at least a provisional acceptance be granted two terms previous to departure to students of whose eligibility one can be reasonably sure. In any case it would be desirable to have all incoming students declare on the advising forms whether or not they are aiming to participate in an overseas study project. Such early planning on the part of students

tends to strengthen not only the overseas program, but--as already mentioned--serves also to give more direction and thrust to the students' whole academic disciplin.

C. Home-campus orientation with regard to the history and culture of the overseas locale.

One comment invariably made by foreigners is that American students persistently continue to look, talk, and act so ver American in the overseas environment. One may reply that they are, after all, American. Usually one does not make the point which at least for the European is difficult to understand, that the American tends to have a very categorical, self-consciously absolute life-style inculcated in him, which is difficult to alter. One simply explains that our students, being without parental support and for the first time completely on their own, do take a little longer to get used to a new social and cultural setting. With the word "culture shock" one generally has hit the nail indeed right on the head.

What remains unsaid is that many of our students return home without ever having gotten used to the different culture, and that in fact most students never identify with the foreign culture sufficiently to seek out, savor and correlate its less obvious aspects. This failure may be attributed in some degree to the highly extrovert and superlative-oriented attitude of American youth, in some degree also to bugs in the overseas programs. Much of the blame must, however, in the writer's opinion be taken by American schools, in as much as they, by and large, do not yet have a well-developed program of preparing their prospective overseas students for the

cultural peculiarities they will have to encounter. --Suggestions toward the establishment of such a program can be best presented by making a distinction between group orientation and individual orientation. This writer has had experience with both, and is of the opinion that an individually geared orientation tends to be a good deal more productive than group orientation. But both have their advantages. And the best program will not only make use of both, but will probably even interrelate them.

Individual orientation for study abroad can't really be done to any degree of adequacy without giving at least one complete semester of time to it. For its main advantage lies in the chance to develop an in-depth focus on one major aspect of the new cultural scene. It would, of course, be feasible to ask a student to do inquiry on two or three different topics; indeed, with students who just cannot be brought to engage in an extended probe this may be the most useful thing to do. But the countless distractions of the overseas locale as well as the many layers of historical change which frequently obliterate one another or at least compete with one another confusingly in the mind of the student, can also make any superficial orientation appear irrelevant and wasteful.. Much more decisive impact could be gained from asking a student to do a research project on a major aspect of the area's history or culture. Depending on what the interests of the student are, it is advisable to have him do a paper on various high points of the area's history, its art, architecture and music, its social institutions such as schools, churches, clubs and sport-forms, its past or present politics, the history, variety and cultural significance of some of its major

businesses or manufactured products, the social and ethnic make-up of its population, its geology, means of public communication, welfare system, pollution control, folk-customs, habits in family life and many others. Such projects could, of course, be continued in the overseas program itself. So far as feasible, however, it is of advantage to have them completed by the time the overseas program begins. For the student will thereby have gained a so much more complete, mature, and far-reaching understanding of his new surroundings. He is likely to experience less culture shock than is the rule now. Above all, however, he has been put on a footing that allows him to take peculiarities of the new culture seriously from the very start, being able to recognize their further dimensions and having more wherewithall to reliably judge ultimate advantages and disadvantages. After all, any academic stay overseas tends to be limited in its length, and generally it is too short now. Getting the student to have a personal and well-informed "in" on the new scene from the very beginning is thus of the essence of good preparation. --It goes without saying that the intensive research implied above, and the serious writing of a research report, cannot be expected to be done over and above the normal course load. It should receive full, official credit. What is more, one should encourage all students and faculty members involved to do such work in satisfaction of requirements for the major. Once again it deserves to be pointed out that this kind of study can be, or at least can contribute to, the most productive segment of undergraduate education.

When coming to speak now about group orientation, one should first of all state that it is most feasible where a group of students from

one American college is planning to study at the same location abroad. In such a situation the preparing of students by means of weekly group sessions represents at once the most practical and least painful way of taking care of everything, from an introduction to the native forms of architecture to what and what not to wear on location. It is a pleasant way for the group to establish a sense of its own identity. What is more, its meetings can be a real boon to the life of the foreign language club, which is quite profitably tied to the whole task of preparing for and following up on overseas study. Most important, however, it provides the chance for a very elemental introduction to the foreign culture, which is best undertaken while still in the U.S. At Beloit College, where this writer gained most of his experience, the director of an overseas seminar meets his group once a week for generally the duration of a whole term. Aside from taking care of whatever he can himself, he invites other members of the faculty (art, government, history, philosophy etc.) to give introductory lectures on the country and area in question. He shows films of the overseas "base" as well as of any cities or countrysides that may be visited. Also he has been known to assign students small research projects on which they reported to the whole group at the end of the preparatory term. On occasion he has invited the group to his house for a getting-acquainted party, picnic or other event (which, incidentally, must be carefully organized in terms of games and activities in order to suit this purpose).

Here are some further suggestions on what may be discussed or presented during preparatory group sessions: The above-mentioned student research may be based at least in part on information brochures

available from consulates, the most important of which could be distributed to all students. Preferably in connection with guide books or brochures available from national tourist centers, it is also useful to inform students as to special sights to see in or near the overseas location, as well as particularly rewarding hikes which may be undertaken while living there. When in cities, the system of public transportation needs to be explained, also the location of various shopping centers, theaters and concert halls, and how to get tickets for the latter. American students going to Europe always benefit from reminders on what to wear on formal occasions, such as going to the opera. And usually it's worthwhile to explain to them also that if new clothes are to be bought for the occasion, one does best to purchase them overseas.

Finally it has proven useful in some cases to conduct sensitivity workshops. These are of primarily two kinds. In order to acquaint students with customs and phrases of speech that are essential when communicating with foreigners a very helpful exercise can be "role playing," whereby several key-situations expected in an overseas locale may be acted out and studied. (A good little text to work with is <u>These Strange German Ways</u>, obtainable from Atlantik-Brücke e.V., 2 Hamburg 64, Sanderskoppel 15.) By contrast to such cross-cultural training, another exercise would try to foster sensitivity and co-operation within the group itself. This sensitivity training in the narrower sense is admittedly a ticklish undertaking. It should not be attempted by anyone except a person well experienced in handling it. But it can be of real advantage if not indeed indispensable with groups of students that do a good deal of studying and travelling together.

Before leaving the subject of preparations for overseas study the writer should mention the suggestion made by a student at the end of his last venture abroad. This suggestion could prove to be very effective, even though it is probably limited to schools with overseas programs of their own: A student steering committee might be appointed (probably from volunteers) to help plan and execute the whole program from beginning to end. Such a committee could provide a central focus of planning and communication during the overseas stay itself. It could be convened, however, to help plan the venture in most of its negotiable details--e.g. trips, parties, discussion groups etc.--also to plan and help realize the various orientation activities before departure, and finally to sponsor any part of the "reentry program" that may be deemed desirable. In order to be of the greatest possible help, the student committee should probably be of the standing kind and have on it both past and future overseas students. Whether or not one will consider giving these students credit for any of the work they invest in such planning, its great educational value should not be overlooked. There accrues from it an identification and creative involvement with the foreign culture that can hardly be duplicated in any other way.

The Re-entry Program

Not too much can or probably needs to be said about the language department's follow-up program on overseas study. Much of it clearly depends on the sensitivity of instructors and advisors in channeling specific interests which individual students may have

developed while abroad. But a few organizational possibilities should be borne in mind.

Above all, returning students need a place and a group in which to exchange their observations and pursue further interests. The place ordinarily is a German House; the group could be the German Club. In fact, a good deal of new blood can be infused into German clubs if they are made the focus of an ongoing preparational and follow-up program, coordinated by the student steering committee. Many of the activities which were suggested as being suitable for preparation serve equally well the purpose of providing a favorable and creative environment for re-entry. In addition there are, of course, activities which arise peculiarly out of the overseas experience. Some of these might be: Reunion socials, an invitation to every recent returnee to read a paper on an issue important to him (perhaps linked with presentation of audio-visuals), putting together a photo-exhibit or slide-program on the recent overseas seminar, staging an event in which students tell of additional trips they took or jobs they held overseas, finally but by no means least, attempting to gear literature readings in the classroom to the particular cultural or geographical area of the overseas program. --But these and many other projects will suggest themselves quite naturally, if the student steering committee is put on a viable basis and is being encouraged to develop its own momentum.

By way of conclusion it should once more be emphasized that that institution tends to fare best which not only has a regular overseas program of its own, developing a sense of identity with one particular foreign base, but which also publicizes widely the opportunities and responsibilities attendant on its program of foreign study, whatever its nature might be.